



Legislation Text

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City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JANUARY 7, 2015

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: MARK B. JINKS, ACTING CITY MANAGER /s/

DOCKET TITLE:

Consideration of the Receipt of the Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Management Plan.

ISSUE: Requesting City Council receipt and discussion of the Management Plan for Fort Ward Park and Museum Area, a multi-year process advised by the Ad Hoc Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Stakeholder Advisory Group.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council:

1. Receive the management plan for Fort Ward Park and Museum Area; and
2. Forward the management plan docket item for public hearing on January 24, 2015 and after the public hearing indicate to the City Manager that the Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities (RPCA), Office of Historic Alexandria (OHA), and Department of Transportation and Environmental Services (T&ES) should proceed to implement the Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Management Plan as outlined in this memorandum within available, or to be made available, future capital and operating budgetary resources.

BACKGROUND: At its December Legislative meeting City Council requested that the Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Management Plan be redocketed for the January 13 Legislative meeting, and that this Management Plan and staff recommendations be docketed for the January 24 public hearing.

Since its establishment in the 1960s, the Fort Ward Park and Museum Area site continues to be an important community and Citywide parks and historic resource. In the fall of 2008, citizens expressed significant community concerns about the operations of the park and its historical resources including, but not limited to:

- The maintenance yard's harmful impacts to significant historic and cultural resources, especially those related to the African American families who previously lived at Fort Ward;
- Stormwater run-off and related erosion;
- Overuse of the park and related impacts on its neighbors and the park's overall condition;
- Declining condition of trees and other plantings throughout the park; and
- A lack of balance between the historic, natural and recreational uses of the park.

In order to respond to these concerns and the longer-term future operations of the park, City Council created an Ad Hoc Stakeholder Advisory Group. The Stakeholder Advisory Group met for a year and developed a set of recommendations for the park and museum area that included the development of a park management plan and the re-establishment of a citizen advisory group. City Council discussed these recommendations at its work session on March 22, 2011, and in the FY2012 budget City Council approved resources for further archaeology study and storm water mitigation, as well as funding for a park management plan in Contingent Reserves (released in April 2013).

The Ad Hoc Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Stakeholder Advisory Group

In June 2011 City Council approved a resolution to re-establish an Ad Hoc Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Stakeholder Advisory Group with the following charge of work:

- Provide staff of RPCA, OHA, and T&ES with recommendations on balancing park uses, implementing education and outreach opportunities and implementation of recommendations made in the 2011 Stakeholder Advisory Group report.
- Bring community values, knowledge, and ideas into the process of creating a management plan for Fort Ward Park and Museum Area in ways that provide lasting benefit to the local community and the City as a whole.
- Act as liaisons for neighborhoods and other interested parties in the development process of a management plan for Fort Ward Park and Museum Area.

This Ad Hoc Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Stakeholder Advisory Group (FWAG) included representatives from: the neighborhood and broader community, as well as from the Oakland Baptist Church, the Seminary Civic Association, the Seminary Hill Association, the Fort Ward and Seminary African American Descendants Society, the Historic Alexandria Resource Commission, the Park and Recreation Commission, and the Environmental Policy Commission. The FWAG met for two years, from September 2012 to September 2014, with a focus on drafting resources for the management plan and providing an iterative review of the management plan as it was developed. The FWAG also hosted community meetings to hear from the public throughout the process.

Why a Management Plan

As noted in the Summary Report of the Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Management Plan (Attachment 1), “*A management plan lays out a long-range plan that provides strategic guidance for decision-making on complex issues that have many variables and potential answers. Expanded from the concept of a master plan - a type of plan that prescribes improvements and their location within a set period of time - a management plan is usually focused on historical and natural resources, educational opportunities and operational issues.*” The City and the FWAG initiated a management planning process as part of a concerted effort to better protect, preserve, manage and in some cases improve the significant historic, cultural, natural and recreational resources at Fort Ward. Along with the involvement of the FWAG and broader community, the management plan depended on some prerequisite and ongoing archaeology work, as well as a study and development of a

stormwater management plan.

Stormwater Planning

As noted above, City Council also approved funding for a stormwater management plan at Fort Ward. The stormwater and management planning were developed separately, but concurrently. Fort Ward Park receives drainage from the adjacent Marlboro Estates subdivision built in the late 1970s, Episcopal High School property and from the Braddock Road area. Over time, due to changes in grading and overland drainage patterns, erosion has occurred in the park and in the adjacent Oakland Baptist Church cemetery. Additionally, the stream in the park is showing signs of erosion and degradation and property owners at the bottom of the park are experiencing flooding. To address these issues, the stormwater study and subsequent Drainage Master Plan (Attachment 2) include overland flow improvements, erosion protection, stream restoration and flood prevention.

In the interim, a trench drain system was designed by T&ES engineers and installed by City maintenance staff in the old maintenance yard that intercepts more than an acre of runoff that would otherwise be draining to the Oakland Baptist Cemetery, and diverting the runoff through a new storm sewer to the existing drainage swale downhill from the cemetery. Construction for the interim drainage project was completed in August 2011.

Archaeology Investigations and Reports

As a result of public interest, City Council funded archaeological work at Fort Ward Park in FY 2010 (\$50,000 for Stage 1) and FY 2012 (\$75,000 for Stage 2A and \$75,000 for Stage 2B). The funds have allowed for archaeological investigation in the historical section of the park to provide information for park planning and management by locating and identifying the full range of cultural resources on the property, not just those related to the Civil War. The City's archaeological and historical work, which is ongoing, includes a focus on the study and interpretation of an African American community that developed on the property after the Civil War and continued as a neighborhood until the creation of the park in the 1960s. Known as "The Fort", the community included many families' homes, a school house that later became a chapel and then a residence, and several burial grounds. To ensure preservation of burials, locating and identifying the African American cemeteries and individual graves on the property have been a critical part of the City-funded initiative.

Approximately 1,400 shovel tests were excavated to look for concentrations of artifacts associated with The Fort community, Native Americans, and other occupants of the park. Metal detection was conducted to identify clusters of Civil War activity outside of the fortifications. More than 100 areas were scraped by a backhoe or hand-excavated to look for evidence of graves and other large features such as foundations or wells and privies. In addition to the Civil War fortifications and barracks, the archaeological features identified include 4 verified cemetery areas with 43 grave locations discovered, 7 possible cemetery areas, 20 areas with the potential to provide insight into life of African Americans at The Fort, 3 scatters of other Civil War materials outside of the fortification, and a scatter of materials related to Native American use of the property. A summary of the findings is included as Appendix II in the management plan and as Attachment 5 of this staff report.

The investigations have led to the delineation of levels of protection for areas across the park, and the management plan incorporates these levels into the determination of proposed and allowable actions. The process to ensure preservation of resources is indicated in the management plan and specified in greater detail in the addendum to the MOU, which is included as Appendix IV of the plan. Verified cemeteries with known graves are designated sacred ground and along with all possible cemetery areas, are considered as zones of maximum protection. There is a procedure in place to look for graves prior to any ground disturbance in all areas where there is potential for graves to be present, along with a stipulation that all burials will be preserved *in situ*.

Additionally, with funding from a Save America's Treasures grant from the National Park Service, the

archaeological work included testing to ensure that a proposed ADA walkway would not disturb any significant archaeological resources and to attempt to determine boundaries of both the Jackson Cemetery and Old Grave Yard so that these sacred areas of the Fort Ward property could be fenced or delineated without disturbing burials.

Finally, in addition to the fieldwork, a history report (Appendix III) on the Fort community has been prepared by consultant Dr. Krystyn Moon. The City also received a \$15,000 grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation to write, design and erect six interpretive markers on the site in collaboration with the descendant community; these were installed in December 2012.

Public Process and Meetings

In addition to the monthly FWAG meetings, which were open to the public and provided a period for public comment, the planning process included a more broadly based engagement of the general public. City staff and the consultant team held two park “listening sessions” in early June 2013 to elicit informal conversations with park visitors. A park survey was also provided at these sessions and online.

The first full draft of the plan was linked to the City’s website in January 2014, and two public meetings were then held - a more formal meeting in February 2014 and an open house in March 2014 - to explain the plan’s contents, answer questions and receive community input. A final public comment session was held with the represented commissions in September 2014. A compilation of the comments received on the final draft is attached to this memo (Attachment 4).

All FWAG and plan related documents were posted on the City’s website
<<http://alexandriava.gov/recreation/info/default.aspx?id=29638>>.

DISCUSSION:

Overview of the Management Plan:

As stated in the referenced document, the Summary Report (Attachment 1) identifies the key recommendations and findings of the Fort Ward planning effort and directs the reader to specific appendices for further information. The plan includes the following five goals:

1. Management and Funding
2. Park Character
3. Landscape Cultural Practices
4. Educate and Engage Visitors
5. Enhance Park Facilities

Recommendations are structured by the goals and subdivided into multiple actions. Given the large number of recommended actions, priorities were established by the FWAG and City, and the Summary Report focuses on these priority actions. The full Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Management Plan goes into much greater detail regarding recommended best practices (for maintenance and operations) and actions for better management of the park, site conditions and interpretive opportunities.

The plan documentation is broken down into two sections along with appendices. Section I is the Summary Report. Section II includes the following chapters: Best Practices, Implementation, Plates (maps), Earthworks, and a Bibliography. The Appendices include: the Drainage Master Plan, the Archaeology Investigations, the History Report, and a copy of the current Interdepartmental MOU and Draft Ground Disturbing Activities

Protocol. The entire Management Plan and its appendices can be found at:
<<http://alexandriava.gov/recreation/info/default.aspx?id=29638>>.

Ad Hoc Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Stakeholder Advisory Group Recommendation

In July 2014 the FWAG received the final draft of the plan, revised to address previous comments and clarify recommendations where necessary. At their August meeting, the FWAG held a discussion on the revised, final draft and made requests for minor edits to the document. In addition, the group requested, and staff agreed to include the current Interdepartmental Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) as an appendix to the plan and to add an attachment to the MOU that provided a protocol and process for any future ground disturbing activities (Attachment 5). The FWAG then voted to move the plan forward for a final public meeting and then on to City Council.

While the majority of the FWAG voted to move the plan forward, there were three dissenting votes from the representatives of the Oakland Baptist Church, the Seminary Civic Association, and the Fort Ward and Seminary African American Descendants Society. Prior to the public meeting in September, the representatives provided a letter describing their ongoing concerns and the reasons they had for not supporting the plan moving forward. The letter and their concerns were discussed at the September 2014 public meeting with the commissions (Attachment 4a). A copy of this letter that includes staff's response to their concerns is attached (Attachment 6).

Along with the majority of the FWAG, each of the represented commissions endorsed the plan. The Historic Alexandria Resource Commission and the Alexandria Archaeological Commission both support the acceptance of the management plan, along with the history report and drainage report appendices. After numerous discussions and a site visit by each group, both commissions believe that the plan provides a path toward the increased preservation of resources and interpretation of the full scope of the park's history. Letters of support from these commissions, as well as from the Park and Recreation Commission, are included (Attachment 7).

Summary of Key Issues

The letter from the representatives noted above, along with the staff response to the concerns identified therein provides a more detailed description of the remaining concerns of FWAG members related to the Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Management Plan and its appendices. The following discussion provides information about key concerns identified.

Identification of Undiscovered Burial Areas

Because the Drainage Master Plan is an appendix to, and associated with, the development of the Management Plan, potential impact of recommended stormwater run-off improvements to any undiscovered burials was identified as a significant concern. In particular, when the draft Drainage Plan was presented, the descendant community expressed concerns about soil being placed on top of graves to create a diversion berm for the water that has been flowing into the Oakland Baptist Church Cemetery. While the Management Plan and Drainage Master Plan both call for archaeology work to occur prior to any stormwater improvements, OHA took more immediate action and is currently conducting an archaeological excavation to determine where graves may be present in the proposed berm areas. At the time of this staff report preparation, approximately 50% of the proposed berm area has been investigated, and no grave locations have been identified. Given the weather conditions, the remaining portions may not be investigated until spring and no work on the stormwater improvements will occur until this work is completed. OHA/RPCA/T&ES have all indicated that the proposed berm locations can be changed to avoid impact to graves and other cultural resources.

Future Interpretive Planning Process and Community Involvement

A priority action identified under Goal 4 of the Management Plan is, “OHA to formally invite key stakeholders from the Fort Ward and Seminary African American Descendants Society, Civil War historians, naturalists, educators and community representatives to participate in a new advisory committee working on the development of an interpretive plan.” As recommended in the Management Plan, OHA will set up an Interpretive Planning Committee to provide guidance on inclusion of interpretive elements. Staff has requested funding for initiating this process through the FY 2016-2025 CIP budget process.

Ongoing Community Involvement in Plan Implementation

The Chair of the FWAG made a recommendation, which the group endorsed, that City Council establish an ongoing citizen advisory group to oversee implementation of the Management Plan. A full description of the recommendation is included in Attachment 4. Staff agrees with the importance of the community’s continued involvement in the ongoing implementation of the Management Plan. Rather than establish an ongoing advisory group for this purpose, however, staff recommends the following three items:

1. Regular topic at involved commission meetings;
2. Annual report and public meeting on the status of implementation;
3. Reports and meetings of the public groups created to support ongoing efforts at Fort Ward Park; and
4. Continuation of the quarterly interdepartmental meetings outlined in the MOU.

Per the first item above, the related commissions (Historic Alexandria Resource Commission, Alexandria Archaeological Commission, Park and Recreation Commission and Environmental Policy Commission) should keep implementation of the Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Management Plan as a regular (monthly) update item on each of their respective agendas. The public and commission members can raise concerns with staff and receive updates on implementation and management activities at the park.

Secondly, to further support public involvement in the Plan’s implementation, staff recommends that in May of every year, the Departments of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities and Transportation and Environmental Services, along with the Office of Historic Alexandria, prepare, and release to the public, an annual report detailing completed and planned actions at Fort Ward Park. The report will provide information regarding implementation of the Management Plan and Drainage Plan, as well as any park operational or maintenance issues. Following release of the annual report, a period of public comment and a public meeting will be held. The report and public comments will be provided to City Council as an update and to inform subsequent budget cycles.

Finally, one of the priority recommendations of the Management Plan is to partner with other community and regional groups to provide both volunteer and financial support for implementation of the plan. As these groups are formed and partnerships with the City are formalized, their regular meetings will provide additional public involvement opportunities throughout the plan’s implementation.

Plan Implementation:

The Summary Report (Attachment 1) includes action priority items under each goal and broken down between actions already underway, and those that require additional funding and support. Those that are currently underway, planned for/funded or completed were reviewed during the planning process by the FWAG, some of which include:

- Review and update of the Interdepartmental MOU;
- Mapping areas where ground disturbance may occur without OHA supervision, with OHA supervision,

- and where it may not occur at all;
- Establish boundaries for turf and meadow management;
- Coordinate with City maintenance practices and maintenance calendar (schedule maintenance);
- Core aerate soils to address compaction and overseed/top dress turf; and
- Enforce existing park regulations.

The Summary Report also outlines action priorities and estimates for related funding or partnership needs for the next one to five years. Highlights of these priorities include:

- Development of interpretive plan;
- Mark and protect “The Fort” community and burial areas and protect burial sites from unintentional recreational use;
- Make existing loop road accessible and provide additional accessible park furniture and parking;
- Mark and protect unrecognized Civil War archaeology;
- Redirect stormwater and sheet flow away from sensitive cultural and recreational resources;
- Remove former maintenance yard access drive, fencing and gate and restore the area;
- Plant new trees and provide additional care for existing trees;
- Remove off-leash dog exercise area;
- Protect earthworks from foot traffic;
- Train all maintenance personnel to minimize damage to resources;
- Relocate the playground and make it more accessible; and
- Identify Fort Ward on region-wide maps, brochures, web-sites and other city publications as a place to explore Alexandria’s history including the Civil War through Civil Rights eras.

RPCA/OHA/TES staff will request CIP and related operating funding for the action priorities through the FY 2016-2025 budget process.

Funding for implementation of the priority recommendations in the Drainage Master Plan was approved in FY2012. Following completion of archaeology work in the areas where stormwater improvements are proposed, T&ES staff along with staff from the Department of Project Implementation (DPI) can begin to implement the plan.

FISCAL IMPACT: The cost of the priority actions in the Management Plan varies by year and the recommendations are phased to distribute the cost by order of priority. The proposed CIP from FY 2016 to FY 2021 for the action priorities totals \$1,395,000. The FY 2016 CIP request is for \$250,000. As is the City’s practice in implementing approved plans of this type, the additional resources required to implement this Management Plan will be considered during the upcoming operation and CIP budget decision making processes and will need to compete citywide with other resource needs for recommended future funding.

ATTACHMENTS:

- Attachment 1: Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Management Plan Summary Report
- Attachment 2: Drainage Master Plan Summary
- Attachment 3: Archaeology Investigations
- Attachment 4: Public Comments on the Final Draft of the Management Plan
- Attachment 4a: Letter from Dissenting FWAG Members
- Attachment 5: Interdepartmental MOU and Protocol for Ground Disturbing Activities

Attachment 6: Letter from Dissenting FWAG Members and City Response

Attachment 7: Commission Letters of Endorsement

Attachment 8: Fort Wart Park and Museum Area Management Plan Presentation

STAFF:

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